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ABSTRACT

Some research has shown that women's achievements in traditionally masculine fields are devalued. To determine if females would be judged more harshly than males for performing unethical behaviors in order to gain entry in competitive professions, and to examine gender differences in the evaluation of unethical conduct, college students (52 males and 142 females) were presented with vignettes of male or female pre-medical students who cheated on an exam and either were caught or not caught. The students then responded to questions regarding the protagonists' personality traits, future success and competence as physicians, frequency of past cheating behavior, and reasons and appropriate punishment for the cheating behavior. Statistical analyses showed a slight own-gender bias on the part of males. Men rated uncaught protagonists higher in the trait "good," while women rated the caught protagonists higher in this trait. Men recommended more severe punishment for cheating than did women, and both men and women predicted that the uncaught protagonists would be more successful physicians. Overall, little gender bias favoring the male protagonist was found. The vignette text and brief rating scale are appended. (WAS)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF MALE/FEMALE UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA, March 23-26, 1983.

Sex Differences in the Perception of Male/Female Unethical Behavior

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Introduction

Recent research indicates that women's achievements in traditionally masculine fields are devalued (Etaugh & Rose, 1975; Goldberg, 1968; Mischel, 1974). A major aim of the present study was to determine if females would also be judged more harshly than males for engaging in unethical behaviors executed in the interest of gaining entry into competitive professions. A second aim of the present study was to examine gender differences in the evaluation of unethical conduct. Contrary to Freud's (1925) theory that females have less internalized moral structures than males, Hoffman (1975) found that while moral transgressions typically arouse guilt in females, they typically arouse fear in males.

Method

One hundred and ninety-four introductory psychology students, 52 males and 142 females, were presented with vignettes describing either male or female pre-med students who cheated on an exam and who were either caught or not caught. Responses to questions regarding the protagonists' personality traits, future success and competence as physicians, frequency of past cheating behavior, and reasons and appropriate punishment for their present cheating were analyzed with a 2 (Sex of Respondent) X 2 (Sex of Protagonist) X 2 (Whether Caught Cheating) analysis of variance.

Results

Slight Own-Gender Bias for Males. Females showed no significant gender bias in the form of more favorably evaluating own gender protagonists, while males only demonstrated slight own-gender bias. Males indicated the female protagonist had engaged in more cheating behavior in the past than the male protagonist, while females believed the protagonists of both sexes had cheated equally frequently before ($F(1,186)=2.365$, $p=.043$). The tendency for males to believe that male protagonists would be better physicians than female protagonists only approached significance, while females made no distinction on the basis of sex of protagonist ($F(1,186)=2.979$, $p=.086$).

The tendency for both males and females to rate own-sex caught protagonists as kinder than opposite sex caught protagonists also only approached significance ($F(1,187)=3.210$, $p=.075$).

Little Gender Bias Favoring the Male Protagonist. Both males and females offered more justifying, external reasons (i.e., situational pressures) for the cheating behavior of the male protagonist than for the female protagonist ($F(1,186)=4.195$, $p=.042$). The tendency for both males and females to view the male protagonist as being more intelligent than the female protagonist only approached significance ($F(1,187)=3.272$, $p=.072$).

Sex Differences in Evaluating Caught and Uncaught Protagonists. Males indicated that uncaught protagonists possessed more of the trait "good", while females indicated that caught protagonists were higher in this trait ($F(1,187)=4.361$, $p=.038$). Similarly, the tendency for males to view uncaught protagonists as being more honest and for females to view caught protagonists as being more honest approached significance ($F(1,187)=2.833$, $p=.094$).

Sex Differences in Recommended Punishment. The punishment deemed appropriate for cheating on the exam by males was more severe than that suggested by females ($F(1,186)=6.688$, $p=.011$).

One Significant Caught Main Effect. Subjects predicted that uncaught protagonists would be more successful physicians ($F(1,186)=6.447$, $p=.012$).

Discussion

Overall, little gender bias favoring the male protagonist was found. Thus, while females' achievements in traditionally male-dominated professions are devalued, they are not judged more harshly than males for engaging in unethical behavior in the attempt to gain entry into these professions.

The two significant sex differences found in the evaluation of the protagonists and their unethical behavior suggest, in agreement with Hoffman's (1975) findings, that males are oriented to the external consequences of unethical conduct, while females are oriented to the internal consequences. The finding that males

indicated that uncaught protagonists were higher in the trait "good" while females indicated that caught protagonists were higher in this trait, suggests that females focus on the rehabilitation of character which may follow detection of unethical behavior, while males focus on the social labeling which may accompany detection. The finding that males recommended more severe punishment for cheating on the exam also appears to suggest that for males fear of the external consequences of unethical conduct is a more effective deterrent than internal consequences, such as guilt.

References

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This is a study on person perception. Individuals make assessments as to what others are probably like, often on the basis of limited information. As more information becomes available, the assessments may change. This study deals with first impressions: what people think of someone on hearing about an incident involving a stranger. Your impressions of this individual may change over time, but we are interested in your immediate "gut reaction".

John (Joan) is a senior in college and is a pre-med major. So far his (her) grades are good and she is hoping that he (she) will be accepted to one of the top medical schools in the country. The competition for acceptance is fierce and many applicants each year are disappointed when they fail to meet the stringent requirements for acceptance.

While taking in exam in neuro-physiology, John (Joan) cheated but was not caught. (John (Joan) was caught cheating).

If John (Joan) is accepted and completes medical school, what kind of physician will he (she) be?

Please circle your answer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Very Poor Very good

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Unsuccessful Successful

Do you think he(she) cheated before?

1	2	3	4
Never	seldom	sometimes	often

What would be your guess as to why John (Joan) cheated?

What should be the punishment for cheating in such a situation?

On a scale of 1 - 10 how do you perceive John (Joan) on the following traits?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not intelligent	Intelligent
Dishonest	Honest
Cruel	Kind
Bad	Good